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Gulf of Secrets: The Evolution of Gulf State Intelligence Services

Why have the Gulf States both professionalized their intelligence services and expanded their capabilities? As Austin Long sees it, three strategic shifts forced the states to act — the rising securitization of terrorism, the fear of US disengagement from the region, and the growing influence of Iran.

By Austin Long for ISN

Both Libya and Yemen are being torn apart by conflicts that, despite having domestic roots, have essentially become proxy wars. While proxy wars are hardly a new phenomenon in the Middle East, the identity of the protagonists in these two wars underscores a major change in the region. The Gulf States (principally Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia) have moved from supporting players, principally providing financial backing for proxy wars led by others, to protagonists taking the lead in covert and sometimes overt action.

In Yemen, it is Saudi Arabia along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and other allies that have taken the lead in supporting the beleaguered government. On the other side is Iran, which is supporting the Shiite minority Houthis who are in turn allied with elements of the former president of Yemen. In Libya, Qatar has been the primary supporter of Islamists, with the UAE the leading supporter of the anti-Islamist faction. In both wars the United States is at best a supporting player if not a bystander. Even in regional wars where the United States is playing a larger role, such as Syria and Iraq, the Gulf States have a significant, and sometimes independent, role.

This movement of the Gulf States from writing checks, as they did in the 1980s to support the mujahedin, to orchestrating campaigns has been both a cause and an effect of significant evolution in their intelligence services. These services have become more professional in response to a changing security environment, particularly changes since 2001. The increasing capability of these services has then enabled more aggressive covert action, which in some cases has then led to overt military intervention.

Three shifts

There have been three major interconnected shifts in the strategic landscape that have driven the evolution of Gulf State intelligence services. First, the threat of terrorism in the Gulf States, while not new, became more acute after 2001. In Saudi Arabia, for example, a series of attacks in 2003 and 2004 sped up efforts to streamline the General Investigation Service, the domestic intelligence

agency (almost universally known even to English speakers as the Mabahith), while also increasing the service's budget. Similar attacks, or attempted attacks, increased the emphasis on domestic intelligence and security in the UAE and Qatar as well.

In addition, U.S. pressure on the Gulf States to curtail support to terrorist organizations from citizens of Gulf States gave some additional impetus to improvement in foreign intelligence. Gulf States began to curtail (though not eliminate) both donations and use of Gulf financial hubs to support terrorists, requiring increasing intelligence capabilities to track money flows. Further, as domestic intelligence services squeezed terrorists out, foreign intelligence services were required to conduct cross-border intelligence and operations.

Cross-border operations have often been conducted in conjunction with Gulf militaries, particularly their special operations components. Indeed, the boundary between intelligence service and military external operations is much less stark than in many Western democracies. While rivalries between different organizations are common, cooperation improved in many Gulf States after 2001.

The second major shift in the strategic landscape is U.S. engagement in the broader Middle East. Like terrorism, U.S. engagement has been a factor in the Gulf for decades. Yet after 2001 U.S. engagement first increased substantially following the invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan and then began to decrease substantially as troops left the region. This shift in U.S. presence in the Gulf combined with U.S. outreach to Iran, relative passivity in Syria, and announced reorientation of U.S. foreign policy to focus more on Asia has caused many in the Gulf States to reevaluate heavy reliance on the United States to achieve their security objectives.

The Arab Spring also contributed to this reevaluation. It underscored the potential for unrest and revolution and the perception (true or not) in the Gulf that the U.S. commitment to regional allies was ambivalent. It also created new opportunities for influence as U.S. influence waned and previously stable regimes fell, some of which was overt (such as aid to Egypt or military support to Bahrain) while some was undoubtedly covert and conducted by intelligence services.

At the same time, close ties to the United States are still seen as important and intelligence cooperation is one of the main assets that Gulf allies provide to the United States. The result has been a drive for improved unilateral Gulf State capabilities that can nonetheless also demonstrate value to the United States. This appears to have fueled the professionalization and expansion of Gulf intelligence services.

One of the most notable examples of this phenomenon is Qatar. In 2004 Qatar retooled its intelligence services, merging them into a single agency – Qatar State Security (QSS). QSS has subsequently become an increasingly professional organization, exemplified by its 'no nonsense' leader Brigadier General Ghanem al-Kubaisi. The general also exemplifies the duality of Qatari intelligence. On the one hand he made headlines for helping arrange the release of an American journalist from Syrian militants, allegedly without paying a ransom, demonstrating the utility of QSS to U.S. interests. At the same time QSS has, according to press reports, orchestrated a network providing arms and finances to Syrian rebels, many of whom are viewed with deep suspicion in the West.

The final reason for the evolution of Gulf intelligence services is Iran, which grew in regional influence after U.S. invasions eliminated hostile regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran's own intelligence services also grew more powerful in this period. This was particularly true of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Qods Force responsible for proxy warfare, which the Iranians waged against the United States in Iraq and to a lesser extent Afghanistan. The cyber-attack on Saudi ARAMCO in 2012, reportedly conducted by Iran, further underscored the need for Gulf State technical intelligence capability.

Confronted by the rising intelligence collection and covert action capabilities of Iran, the Gulf States were propelled to develop countermeasures.

Yet despite a shared enemy in Iran, the Gulf States are also rivals with one another. The major faultline at present appears to be over the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists. Qatar has long sought to embrace, and even co-opt, such groups. In contrast, many of the other Gulf States, particularly the UAE, view Islamists like the Brotherhood with skepticism if not outright hostility. Thus while the Gulf States are broadly in agreement in supporting opposition to the Houthis in Yemen and Iranian ally Bashar al-Assad in Syria, they support opposite sides of the war in Libya. The intelligence services provide not only a means to cooperate but also to compete—but quietly and in the shadows, rather than through overt military posturing.

The rise of the UAE

No Gulf State better exemplifies both the effects of the regional strategic shifts and the growing professionalism of intelligence services than the UAE. The UAE's federal level intelligence service, the State Security Department (SSD), has made significant progress in absorbing new information technology capabilities. At the same time, under the leadership of Lieutenant General Hamid al-Shamsi, the SSD has shifted from a focus that was almost exclusively domestic to one that looks beyond the UAE's borders.

The UAE's Special Operations Command, though not an intelligence service, is alleged to provide "muscle" to the SSD for covert action when required. British special operations forces are alleged to have a similar arrangement with the United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service. UAE special operations forces are regarded as some of the best in the region, having deployed a small contingent to Afghanistan for years in support of the American-led coalition. With excellent air support available from the UAE's modern fighter-bombers and helicopter gunships, UAE special operations are reported to have been very successful in covert operations against Islamists in Libya. In addition to these federal level organizations, the Emirate of Dubai maintains its own domestic intelligence service, the Dubai Security Service (DSS).

The UAE has developed and deployed these assets to address all three strategic shifts in the region. The intelligence services, relying heavily on a variety of technical means, have become adept at countering terrorism and foreign intelligence activity. This was demonstrated vividly following the assassination of Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh in Dubai in 2010. The UAE's intelligence services quickly connected video surveillance to false passports and credits cards ultimately alleged to link the killers to Israel's intelligence service.

The UAE has also used its intelligence services to support a closer relationship to the United States, supporting its ally not only in Afghanistan but in most other regional conflicts apart from the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Yet the intelligence services are also a hedge against any potential U.S. withdrawal from the region and, as in Libya, can be used to pursue unilateral objectives. Finally, the intelligence services provide a defense against subversion and proxy warfare that some in the UAE fear Iran might undertake.

War in the Gulf, barring a major escalation over Iran's nuclear program, is likely to remain a 'twilight war,' conducted via proxies, supported in some cases by airpower and special operations. This model served the United States well in the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, leading to rapid success. The evolution of their intelligence services and supporting military capabilities now enables the Gulf States (and Iran) to pursue similar campaigns, both in coalitions and unilaterally. Yet the United States found consolidating peace in Afghanistan after using this model extraordinarily challenging. The Gulf States may soon be learning similar lessons in Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere.

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